

TABLE OF GODS



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Mersu

King Zimri-Lim loved *mersu* so much that he employed eight *mersu* specialists, known as *sha mersim*, in his palace. Whenever the king hosted banquets, the *sha mersim* baked enormous quantities of *mersu*.

The earliest mention of *mersu* comes from Ur during the Sumerian renaissance around 2100 BC. But the dessert may be even older, as *mersu* is an Akkadian word derived from *marasu*, meaning “to mix.” Little is known about *mersu* during this period, though a clay tablet confirms that it included flour and ghee. Later tablets reveal that the dessert could also include figs, raisins, apples, dates, pistachios, oil, beer, cumin, coriander, and believe it or not, onions and garlic.

But what did the final dessert taste and look like? Since *mersu* was sometimes called *ninda mersu* (*ninda* meaning “bread”), it may have been a sweetened loaf. Some scholars even believe it may have been a pudding, while others think it was a cake. The *mersu* specialists mixed the ingredients for *mersu* in vessels called *namharu*, which could hold up to 40 sila (roughly 40 liters). If flour and ghee were the staple ingredients, they were likely mixed into a dough or batter, with other ingredients folded in, and then probably baked in a dome oven. Perhaps using one of the 48 cake molds archaeologists uncovered in Zimri-Lim’s palace kitchen.

There must have been a number of ways of making *mersu*. The dessert remained popular into the Neo-Assyrian era, about 1,500 years after the first recorded source of *mersu* in Ur. Our initial attempts at recreating *mersu* resulted in a cake. But many iterations later, and after discovering this Sumerian proverb, “there’s no baked cake in the middle of the dough,” we settled on this recipe. It’s just one version of *mersu*—but one I’m certain King Zimri-Lim would have loved.

PS: If you make this dessert, I’d love to know about it. Send me an email at arim@tableofgods.com and include a photo if you can. More importantly, don’t forget to add *sha mersim* to your resume once you’ve perfected the recipe



Naptunu qarrub!

Arim

Origin: Mari 1771 BC
Prep time: 35 minutes
Cook time: 18 minutes
Makes: 12 cookies

Ingredients

Filling

½ cup (120 ml) date syrup
¾ cup (90 g) unsalted pistachios, shelled and finely chopped, plus another 12 pistachios for decorating each cookie
3 pinches of ground cumin

Dough

14 tablespoons (200 g) salted butter at room temperature
½ cup (175 g) honey
2½ cups (360 g) all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon ground cardamom
Pinch of table salt

Instructions

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F (175°C).
2. To make the filling, in a small bowl, mix the date syrup, pistachios, and cumin.
3. To make the dough, in a large bowl, use a hand mixer to beat the butter and honey until smooth.
4. Add the flour, cardamom, and salt. Knead until the dough is malleable and you can't see any traces of flour.
5. Divide the dough into 12 equal parts.
6. Working with one piece at a time, roll it into a ball, and make a deep indentation. Fill the indentation with 1 tablespoon of the date filling. Seal the dough around the filling by gently pulling the edges together and pinching them closed. If the dough becomes too difficult to handle, refrigerate it for 10 minutes to make it easier to work with.
7. Place the filled dough balls in a muffin tin with the seam sides down.
8. Gently press a whole pistachio on the top of each cookie.
9. Bake in the middle of the oven for 15–18 minutes, or until the sheen of the butter has disappeared from the cookies.